DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 292 917 UD 026 086

AUTHOR Clay, Phyllis L.
TITLE Single Parents and the Public Schools. How Does the Partnership Work? NCCE Occasional Papers.
INSTITUTION National Committee for Citizens in Education, Columbia, Md.
PUB DATE 81
NOTE 69p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Tests/Evaluation Instruments (160)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC03 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Ancillary School Services; Day Care; Elementary Secondary Education; Employed Parents; Extracurricular Activities; Instructional Materials; *One Parent Family; *Parent Attitudes; *Parent Grievances; *Parent School Relationship; *Public Schools; Questionnaires; School Activities; School Attitudes; School Buses; Sensitivity Training; Social Support Groups; Teacher Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS Empowerment; Noncustodial Parents

ABSTRACT

In order to determine the nature of the partnership between single parents and the public schools, 1,237 single parents from 47 states were surveyed. The survey revealed the following parent attitudes: (1) many school-related activities are scheduled during the day when most single parents work; (2) school personnel seldom take the lead in communicating with noncustodial parents; (3) curriculum materials present the nuclear family as being "normal"; (4) there are not enough classes and group sessions for children about death, separation, or divorce; (5) there is a lack of availability of before- and after-school day care; (6) there are not enough late afternoon buses making after-school activities available to the children; and (7) there are not enough in-service training programs for school personnel on single-parent family/school issues. The following questions are addressed: (1) what assumptions are single parents encountering? (2) how do single parents view the attitudes of school personnel? (3) should the schools know a parent's marital status? (4) how do participants feel about the schools? and (5) how do single parents feel about their children's school behavior and achievement? Recommendations for both parents and schools are offered. A copy of the survey instrument and a list of resources (books, articles, periodicals, organizations, films, filmstrips, videotapes, curriculum materials, in-service training) are included. (BJV)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

3-30-88

NCCE Occasional Papers

ED292917

Single Parents and the Public Schools

How does the partnership work?

Results of a National Survey

Phyllis L. Clay

UD026086

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Christina T. Bonfer
National Committee for Citizens in Education
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

SINGLE PARENTS AND THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

HOW DOES THE PARTNERSHIP WORK?

Results of a National Survey

By Phyllis L. Clay

National Committee for Citizens In Education

National Committee for Citizens in Education

Copyright 1981

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To Chrissie Bamber and Bill Rioux, who kept a file long before the project started that helped me get my feet wet;

To Mary Anne Bunda, mentor and friend, whose methodological suggestions steered me clear of many pitfalls;

To those single parents who gave generously of their time when I invited them to help me think through the questions to ask in the survey;

To Maryanne Blair, Kathy Friedel, and Beverly Norbeck, who helped me get organized, who kept track of participants and others interested in the study, who helped me keep up with my correspondence, who typed and retyped and put up with my disorganized search for perfection;

To Chrissie Bamber, Carl Marburger, Bill Rioux and Stan Salett, who gave suggestions and were always ready to help me ponder next steps;

To Ann Parks, of Parents Without Partners, and to Bill Riley, of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Office, for their continued willingness to answer questions;

To all the participants who made the study possible;

To Nona Kuhlman, who got the computer to tell me what I wanted to know;

And to Billie Lacy, George McCulley, Nancy McGrath and Rich Ulrich, who carefully reviewed and helped me revise the report --

THANK YOU!

We are grateful to the W. T. Grant Foundation and the Ittleson Foundation, Inc., for their support of this project.

CONTENTS

Introduction 5

Background 9

The Development of the Survey Questionnaire 13

The Questionnaire 17

The Survey Procedure 21

Data 25

A. WHO PARTICIPATED? 27

B. WHAT SCHOOL PROGRAMS AND POLICIES AFFECT SINGLE FAMILIES? 29

Parent Activities in the School 29

Non-Custody Parents 33

Curriculum Materials 40

Groups for Children 42

Before and After School Care for Chidlren 43

Late Buses 46

In-Service Training for School Personnel 47

C. WHAT ASSUMPTIONS ARE SINGLE PARENTS ENCOUNTERING? . 49

D. HOW DO SINGLE PARENTS VIEW THE ATTITUDES OF SCHOOL PERSONNEL? 52

E. SHOULD THE SCHOOLS KNOW A PARENT'S MARITAL STATUS? 56

F. HOW DID PARTICIPANTS FEEL ABOUT THE SCHOOLS? . . . 60

G. HOW DO SINGLE PARENTS FEEL ABOUT THEIR CHILDREN'S SCHOOL BEHAVIOR AND ACHIEVEMENT? 62

Conclusion 65

Resources 69

INTRODUCTION

National Committee for Citizens In Education

Our public education system assumes a partnership between home and school, both working toward the education of our children, both doing their part to ensure a smooth transition between home and school for the child. This partnership is important to all families, and especially so for the single-parent family. Single-parent families depend on the schools as a crucial source of continuity in the life of their children, particularly during the initial period of separation, the most stressful time for children.

The partnership between home and school is also important to the school. By being responsive to family needs, schools gain some of the community support necessary to carry out their mission to educate children. The special partnership with single-parent families can indicate the school's willingness to make the extra effort essential if the mission is to be accomplished.

For single-parent families, however, logistical difficulties are often greater than for two-parent families (there is only one adult to juggle work, home chores, child care, and school contacts). This makes interaction between home and school harder to arrange and, therefore, the partnership more difficult to maintain.

The purpose of this study was to see how the partnership is working for single-parent families. The information in the study was gathered from single parents, using a survey questionnaire. Some of the questions we asked single parents requested facts (Does your school have a program to _____?) Some of the questions

asked for impressions (What do you think or feel about _____?) The data we gained from the survey, therefore, range from hard (factual) to soft (impressionistic).

The conclusions grow out of both the hard and the soft data. We have stated the conclusions in the form of suggestions: suggestions about what schools can do and what single parents can do to strengthen the partnership that is needed by both.

National Committee for Citizens In Education

The National Committee for Citizens in Education is a private non-profit organization whose purpose it is to help parents/citizens gain and use information and skills to influence the quality of public education for their children. Every day we receive phone calls and letters from parents from all across the country who have concerns about the responsiveness of schools to them and to their children.

About four years ago, we began receiving an increased number of pleas for information and assistance from single parents. Some of them were parents whose children were living with them. These parents were saying: "The schools are treating my child as though every kid has two parents in the home. What can I do?" Others were parents who did not have custody of their children. These parents were saying: "The school is treating me like a zero. I can't get any information about how my child is doing. I have divorced her/his father/mother, but I have not divorced my child! What can I do?"

As a result of the increased phone calls and mail from single parents, NCCE decided to look more closely at single parents' experiences with the public schools. With the help of the William T. Grant Foundation and the Ittleson Foundation, Inc., we have been doing just that for the last two years. As we began to investigate the extent of single parent families in this country, we found that nearly one in every five school-age children lives with one parent. The most recent U.S. Bureau

of the Census figures (March 1979) indicate that 18.5% of the children under 18 live within single-parent households. The figure is even higher for school-age children (6-17 years old) at 19.6%. Over 7.5 million school-age children live with their mothers only, while 800,000 live with fathers only.

Since 1962, the rate of divorce has continued to increase. While figures from the National Center for Health Statistics show that only 2.2 per 1,000 people were granted divorces in 1962, 5.3 per 1,000 were divorced for the ten-month period ending October 1980. Although there is some indication that the climbing divorce rate is leveling off (5.0 in 1976 and 1977; 5.2 in 1978), slowed growth in the future cannot be predicted with confidence. In fact, the Census Bureau makes the astonishing prediction that nearly "half of the children born during 1979 will spend a part of their childhood in single-parent homes." These figures indicate that children from single-parent homes will continue to comprise a significant proportion of the children in our public schools.

Part of our study involved a national survey of single parents. Over 1,200 single parents from 47 states participated. In the survey, we asked parents what school programs and policies are responsive to single-parent family needs; and we asked them what attitudes they perceive in school personnel. This report focuses on that survey, covering the development of the questionnaire, the survey procedures, and the results of the survey.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

National Committee for Citizens In Education

To help us in identifying the issues single parents face when dealing with the public schools, we brought together small groups of single parents and listened to them talk about their experiences with the public schools. Some of these parents were also teachers; so they had experiences to relate from both sides. After listing the issues raised by these parents, we grouped the issues into similar concerns and developed questions to address each concern. These questions were then circulated to experts in the field of survey design and to single parents to check for completeness, repetition, and clarity. On the basis of this information, we developed the questionnaire. The questionnaire follows this section.

One of the difficulties always encountered in a questionnaire approach is maximizing the information gathered while minimizing the difficulty of collating and analyzing the information. We, therefore, decided on a basically closed-ended ("yes, no, don't know") format with a request for comments at the end.

National Committee for Citizens In Education

A Survey of Single Parents

How Do the Schools Meet Your Needs?

A SURVEY OF SINGLE PARENTS

National Committee for Citizens In Education

SCHOOL PROGRAMS AND POLICIES

Directions for this section: check one box (☑) in each category ("what is" and "what should be") for each item. "What is" refers to the present practice of the school(s) you deal with. "What should be" refers to your opinion about what the school(s) should be doing. If the question does not apply to your situation, please check "N/A" (not applicable).

What Is					What Should Be		
Yes	No	Don't Know	N/A		Yes	No	Don't Know
				1. Are the following parent activities at the school scheduled so that you can be there without taking off work:			
☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	a. parent-teacher conferences?	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	b. programs or parent-teacher organization meetings (e.g., PTA, PTO)?	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
				2. Are child-care arrangements provided by the school for children:			
☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	a. during parent-teacher conferences, programs or parent-teacher organization meetings (e.g., PTA, PTO)?	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	b. before and after school when you are working?	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	3. At evening social events and parent meetings are children welcome to attend?	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
				4. Does the parent without custody:			
☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	a. receive information about school activities from the school?	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	b. have access to parent-teacher conferences?	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	c. receive the child's report cards?	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	d. have access to the child's school records?	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	5. Are there spaces on school forms for addresses and phone numbers of both custody and non-custody parents?	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
				6. Are a variety of family styles (e.g., single father, two-parent family, single mother, adopted children, foster children, non-parent adult living in the home, etc.) included in:			
☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	a. the textbooks your child uses?	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	b. the other school materials your child is exposed to (e.g., workbooks, film strips, etc.)?	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	c. school library books?	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	7. Are there books in the school library that help children deal with death, divorce or loneliness?	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	8. Does the school offer any classes or group counselling sessions for children about death, separation or divorce?	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	9. Does the school offer any parenting courses specifically for single parents?	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	10. If your child rides a school bus, are there late afternoon buses so she/he can take part in after-school activities?	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	11. Do you feel any pressure from the school to join the parent organization?	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	12. Are you invited to participate in school field trips?	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3

We would like to know more about the programs your child's school has that are responsive to the needs of a single-parent family. Please briefly describe any special classes or counselling sessions for the single-parent child, parenting courses, other programs or policies.

If there are other areas in which you would like to see the public schools be more responsive to your needs as a single parent, please explain briefly:

COMMUNICATION

Directions: please check one box (☑) for each item.

	Yes	No
1. Do you feel that you have the kind of influence in your child's educational experience you would like to have?	☐ 1	☐ 2
2. Has contact from the school ever been made when there was no immediate problem with your child?	☐ 1	☐ 2
3. Have you ever had to take time off work to discuss a problem with your child's teacher?	☐ 1	☐ 2

ATTITUDES OF SCHOOL PERSONNEL

Directions: please check one box (☑) for each item.

1. In your opinion, what kind of general attitude do the school personnel you know show toward single parents?

   Positive ☐ 1 Negative ☐ 2 No opinion ☐ 3

   Please explain briefly:

2. In what way have you heard public school personnel speak about single parents or children from one-parent homes?

   Positively ☐ 1 Negatively ☐ 2 No opinion ☐ 3

   Please give brief examples:

	Yes	No	Don't Know
3. Have you heard school personnel mention "broken homes" or other stereotype language when speaking of single-parent families?	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
4. Do you feel school personnel have a protective attitude toward children who have experienced divorce or death of a parent?	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
5. To your knowledge, has your child been questioned by school personnel about the care your give him/her?	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
6. Do you feel the school assumes that any problems your child has (emotional, behavioral, achievement) are related to being from a single-parent family?	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
7. Do you think school personnel consider the one-parent family to be a normal family style?	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
8. If you and your child have different last names, have school personnel commented about the difference?	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
9. Does the school assume that *both* parents are in the home by the following:			
a. planning social events for only mother or father to attend with the child (for example, Breakfast with Dad, Mother and Daughter Dinner, etc.)?	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
b. asking children to interview their mother/father for a class assignment?	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
c. asking children to make presents for mother/father at the school?	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3
d. pressuring children to get *both* parents to attend a parent meeting (so that, for example, the room will get more points for higher attendance)?	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3

GENERAL INFORMATION

Directions: Please check the appropriate boxes (☑).

1. I am single: mother ☐ 1 father ☐ 2
2. Type of singleness:

   Always single ☐ 1 Separated ☐ 2 Divorced ☐ 3 Widowed ☐ 4
3. If separated or divorced:
   a. Do you have custody of one or more of your school-age children?

      Yes ☐ 1 No ☐ 2
   b. Does the non-custody parent live close enought to visit school?

      Yes ☐ 1 No ☐ 2
4. How many school-age children do you have? _____
5. Do your school-age children attend a public school?

   Yes (all of them) ☐ 1 Some do/some don't ☐ 2 None do ☐ 3
6. Do school personnel know your marital status?

   Yes ☐ 1 No ☐ 2 Don't know ☐ 3
7. Do you think the schools *should* know about your marital status?

   Yes ☐ 1 No ☐ 2 No opinion ☐ 3

   Why, or why not? _____

   _____
8. Are you troubled by your child's:
   a. school achievment? Yes ☐ 1 No ☐ 2
   b. school behavior? Yes ☐ 1 No ☐ 2
9. Are you satisfied with school personnel response to you as a single parent?

   Yes ☐ 1 No ☐ 2
10. If you are experiencing frustration with the public schools, do you feel the frustration is related to being a single parent?

    Yes ☐ 1 Partially ☐ 2

    No, even if I were *not* a single parent, the same areas would trouble me. ☐ 3
11. How high a priority is the school in your everyday life?

    Very high ☐ 1

    High, but other things take most of my time and effort ☐ 2

    I am too busy trying to survive to give *any* time or energy to schools ☐ 3
12. Race/ethnic background _____.
13. I am: Employed ☐ 1 Unemployed ☐ 2

    If employed, is your employment with a public school syste

    Yes ☐ 1 No ☐ 2 N/A ☐ 3
14. How would you describe your living status?

    Poverty/welfare ☐ 1 Middle ☐ 4

    Lower income ☐ 2 Upper middle ☐ 5

    Lower middle ☐ 3 Upper ☐ 6
15. How would you describe your community?

    Urban ☐ 1 Suburban ☐ 2 Rural ☐ 3
16. How did you receive this questionnaire?

    Through my child's school ☐ 1

    At a singles' or single parents' meeting ☐ 2

    Through a community organization ☐ 3

    I asked to participate in the study ☐ 4

    Other _____ ☐ 5

Your name and address (optional, of course; all responses wil. *COMPLETELY CONFIDENTIAL*):

Name _____

Street _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Name and address of *school* that has responsive programs:

School Name _____

Name of Principal _____

Street _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Please enclose additional comments on a separate sheet.

National Committee for Citizens in Education (NCCE)
Suite 410, Wilde Lake Village Green
Columbia, Maryland 21044

THE SURVEY PROCEDURE

National Committee for Citizens In Education

There is no easily-known population from which to draw a random sample of single parents. From a statistical standpoint, the safest way to get participants for a survey is to do a random sample of all the potential candidates. This is "safe" because it is "scientifically sound," an accepted way of doing such studies, and it increases the assurance that the results obtained will be representative of the entire population, provided, of course, a good response is received from those surveyed. As might be expected, we encountered a few difficulties in implementing this approach. There is no daily-updated list of all the single parents in the United States. That is, of course, as it should be to protect the privacy of individuals.

We decided, therefore, to use a self-select approach to obtaining participants and focused on getting the word out through as many sources as possible. This included notices in local papers, announcements in our own publication, *NETWORK,* a booth at two national singles conferences, articles announcing the study in two major magazines (*Good Housekeeping and Family Circle).* Parents Without Partners announced the study in its national magazine and included a copy of the survey in a newsletter to all its chapters (nearly 100 chapters contacted us for multiple copies of the survey).

The National Elementary School Principals featured the topic of single-parent families in its October 1979 issue.

We had an article in that issue, and a number of schools offere to make questionnaires available to single parents as a result of the article.

Parent groups and community agencies also made questionnaires available to single parents they served. Publications of various organizations, such as the American Personnel and Guidance Association and the New Jersey School Board Associatic carried announcements of the study.

All of these were helpful in getting questionnaires out. In all, we distributed 20,000 questionnaires.

DATA

National Committee for Citizens In Education

A. WHO PARTICIPATED?

A total of 1,237 single parents from 47 states participated in the study. They were largely white, suburban, lower-middle and middle-income single mothers. They were a group of parents who were interested in the schools, and who saw the schools as a high priority in their lives.

Of the participants, 88.5% were mothers and 11.5% were fathers. Most of the participating mothers and fathers (93%) had custody of their school-age children. Nationally, 91% of the children living with one parent live with their mother; the remaining 9% live with their father.

The majority of parents who participated were divorced (70%); 10% were widowed; another 7% had always been single, and 14% were separated (rounding accounts for the extra percentage over 100%).

The participants had from one to nine school-age children. By far the majority of the parents (80%) had one or two children. Another 15% had three children.

Ninety-three percent of the parents had children in public schools. Since the data showed only very slight differences, if any, when the responses from private school parents were computed separately, the results are reported for all participants.

The majority of the participants in the study were white (78%). Five percent were black. American Indians, Asians, and Hispanics each comprised fewer than 1% of the total participants. Since

the nation's single-parent population has a heavy representation of black urban mothers, we recognize that our sample is not totally reflective of the nation's single parents. The question asking the race or ethnic background of the participants was a write-in item, and was left blank by 16% of the participants. If all of those leaving this item blank were black (which is unlikely), the proportion would more nearly approximate representativeness. It is, however, interesting to note that when the data were analyzed, only very slight differences were noticed among sururban, urban and rural populations, or between black and white populations.

Six percent of the parents described their living status as poverty/welfare; 17% as lower income; 32% as lower middle; 33% as middle; 11% as upper middle; and less than 1% as upper. Fifty-nine percent described their community as suburban; 26% said they live in urban settings; while 15% indicated they live in a rural area.

The heavy representation of lower-middle and middle income, of whites and of suburban single parents is in some ways not surprising; much interest in the study was generated by the attention given it by *Good Housekeeping, Family Circle,* and Parents Without Partners, who draw heavily from white, lower-middle and middle income, suburban audiences.

Ninety percent of the participants were employed. The proportion of employed single parents in the study is higher than the national figures as of March 1979, when only 71% of

single mothers and 86% of single fathers were in the labor force. Of the survey participants who were employed, 15% worked for school systems.

B. WHAT SCHOOL PROGRAMS AND POLICIES AFFECT SINGLE-PARENT FAMILIES?

The programs and policies discussed in this section are areas in which schools interact with single-parent families. Some areas are being handled in ways that are supportive to the partnership between single parents and schools. Other areas are more problematic. For each area, suggestions are made about ways to strengthen the partnership.

Parent Activities in the School

Many school-related activities are scheduled during the day when a majority of single parents work (90% of the single parents in this study). For example, 45.5% of the parents in this study reported they have to leave work in order to attend parent-teacher conferences. Fifty-one-and-a-half percent reported that they have had to take time off work to discuss a problem with their child's teacher.

Parent organization meetings seem to be more conveniently scheduled. Seventy-five percent of the respondents said they could attend these meetings without taking time off work.

Obviously, this scheduling issue would affect more than just single parents. *Any* parent who works will experience at least inconvenience, if not a salary penalty, if he or she has to arrange to leave work to attend school activities.

Some schools, aware that daytime conferences are not realistic for many working parents, are making evening appointments for those parents who need them. Some individual teachers are willing to "get together" by phone with parents on their lunch hour, during planning time, or in the evening.

Unfortunately, contacts initiated by the schools seem problem oriented. Nearly two-thirds of the parents (65%) said th schools had contacted them only when there was an immediate problem with their children. This is no doubt related to a time factor and the "squeaky wheel" syndrome. It does not, however, do much to promote cordial, open communications between home and school. It is also possible this experience of single parents is reflective of a general habit on the part of school personnel to make contact with the home only when there is a problem brewing.

Even when programs or conferences are scheduled during the evening, child care for young children presents a problem. As difficult as the logistics are for married parents, they do at least have the option of trading off child care responsibilities and alternating their attendance at evening meetings. Single parents often have no one who can "spell" them for these duties. Single parents as a rule have lower family income than married

parents and are, therefore, less able to afford child care on a fee basis. Even when child care is affordable, there is no one to stay with the child while a single parent drives the sitter home. Yet very few schools (only 10% of those attended by participants' children) provide child care for parent activities, and at only 42% of those schools are children welcome to attend social events and parent meetings.

Field trips are another possible way for a parent to participate at school. Forty-two percent of the parents responding to the study said they had not been invited to participate in school field trips, though 87% indicated they thought the schools should be inviting them. The balance between inviting and pressuring is delicate. It seems, from responses to this item, that a majority of single parents want to be invited (included) even if the activity would likely be impossible for them (such as a daytime field trip scheduled when they are working).

On the *pressuring* side, however, only 22% of the participants thought the school should pressure them to join the parent organization. About the same proportion (23%) had felt pressure from the school.

What do single parents want in the way of parent activities? In addition to preferences cited above, most of the single parents responding to these items indicated a desire for:

- Parent teacher conferences at a time when they would not have to leave work (95%).

- Parent organization meetings at times when they wouldn't have to leave work (96%);
- Child care provided by the school during parent-teacher conferences, programs, or parent organization meetings (79%);
- Schools welcoming children at social events and parent meetings (72%);
- A parenting course specifically for single parents (83%). Such a course is currently available to only 5% of the participants.

SUGGESTIONS FOR PARENTS

- *Initiate contacts with teachers and other school personnel. Ask for information, and provide information on circumstances that may produce a behavioral change in the child (new medication, change in visiting patterns, death of a pet, etc.)*
- *If you cannot arrange a face-to-face conference with the teacher, set up a mutually convenient time when you can talk with him or her by phone.*
- *Develop a baby-sitting cooperative with other single parents so you can rotate going to meetings.*

SUGGESTIONS FOR PARENT-TEACHER ORGANIZATIONS

- *Plan programs in which children can participate.*
- *Provide child care, on a fee (or free!) basis for evening meetings; perhaps arrangements can be made with the high school child development class to provide field experience for the students.*
- *Develop a roster of volunteer babysitters so small children do nothave to stay up past bedtime.*

SUGGESTIONS FOR SCHOOLS

- *Call parents when something good happens with their children.*

- *If a parent cannot come to a conference, arrange to have a phone conference.*
- *Arrange for in-service training for staff on how to be more effective working with single parents and children from single-parent families.*

Non-Custody Parents

Judging by the responses of participants in our study, school personnel seldom take the lead in communicating with non-custody parents. Only 4.5% of the participating parents reported that the parent without custody receives information about school activities from the school, though nearly two-thirds said these parents should receive such information. Only 6.5% of the parents reported that the non-custody parent receives the child's report cards. Again, nearly two-thirds felt that the reports should be sent to non-custody parents.

When the non-custody parent takes the initiative with the school, they seem to fare better. Nearly 35% of the participants indicated that the non-custody parent may attend parent-teacher conferences (75% said this should be possible) and 31.5% reported that non-custody parents do have access to school records (70% agreed that such access should be availalbe).

Another question in the survey that relates to non-custody parents asked whether school forms have spaces for the addresses and phone numbers of both custody and non-custody parents. Only 35% of the participants reported that they did, while nearly half (47%) indicated that this information was not requested.

One school that does provide spaces for both parents on the registration form asks with whom the child lives (both parents, mother only, father only, or other). There are also spaces for names and addresses of male and female head of household and additional spaces for names and addresses of male and female parent, if different.

Isolina Ricci, in her book, *Mom's House, Dad's House: Making Shared Custody Work,*[1] recommends an "additional information" form that is optional. On the form are spaces for names and phone numbers of natural mother and father, stepmother and father, adult friend, relative, guardian, and "others." The form also requests information about the rights these adults have as well as the legal status or relationship to the child of the person filling out the form.

In a recent summer workshop for teachers, school counselors, and other school personnel in Baltimore County, Maryland, one of the major assignments was to design a form that included information about both custody and non-custody parents. As straightforward as that seems, it was no easy task.

In the school records instance, almost a third of the parents reported that they did not know the school's policy regarding the non-custody parent's access. The lack of knowledge

---

1. New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1980.

about the non-custody parent's access may indicate a more general lack of knowledge about the right of any parent to view his/her child's student records. It is important to point out that of all the areas covered in this study, access to student records is the only issue covered by federal law. According to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) of 1974, parents *do* have access to school records of their children. The definition of "parent" in the FERPA implementing regulations is as follows:

> "Parent" includes a parent, a guardian, or an individual acting as a parent of a student in the absence of a parent or guardian. An educational agency or institution may presume the parent has the authority to exercise the rights inherent in the Act unless the agency or institution has been provided with evidence that there is a state law or court order governing such matters as divorce, separation or custody, or a legally binding instrument which provides to the contrary. (Emphasis added.)

In a document called "Custody and Parent Rights Under FERPA,"[3] the rights of a non-custody parent to view a child's records are explained as follows:

> One can best understand the FERPA position on parent rights if he separates the concept of custody from the rights that the FERPA accords parents. Custody or other residential arrangements for a child do not, in themselves, affect the rights of the child's parents under the

---

2. FERPA Regulations, Section 99.3.
3. Available from the FERPA office.

> FERPA. The FERPA deals with a parent's rights of access to and control over a child's education record.
>
> For the purposes of the FERPA, a school district must accord a natural parent the rights the Act accords him or her unless the courts or a responsible party has provided it a legally binding document that specifically removes that parent's right to have knowledge about and participate in his or her child's educational process.

Again, if a school makes an exception to this right of a non-custody parent to see his or her child's school records, the exception must be backed by a court order or legally binding instrument which has been previously presented to the school. The burden of proof rests on the custody parent (or the court) to produce such a document and not on the parent without custody to show that there is not one.

In our contacts with schools, we have occasionally heard school personnel report that they *never* allow non-custody parents access to records or that they must first ask the permission of the custody parent. One school district's lawyer advised against allowing access to non-custody parents. These positions are illegal, according to William Riley of the Department of Education's Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act office. Access must be provided to all parents, non-custody parents included.

One school district that is particularly responsive to parents without custody is Mayfield, Ohio. There, custody parents are asked to provide information on how to contact

the parent without custody. The school then sends a letter to the non-custody parent informing her/him of the school's policy to send a calendar of school events, copies of report cards, and notification of parent-teacher conferences if these are desired.

In another forward-looking policy position, the state of Michigan has ruled that public schools must grant equal rights and privileges to parents whether or not they have custody of their children. This includes separate parent-teacher conferences and copies of class pictures, as well as the right to inspect school records. But this success story came about because one non-custody father was willing to hang onto his rights through a long, strenuous battle.

A less encouraging tale comes from a school district in Ohio which responds to requests for information from a non-custody parent by contacting the custodial parent for permission. If the parent with custody objects, the request for information will only be granted if the school is pressured by the parent making the request.

Unfortunate as it may be, an apparent key to the success of non-custody access to school information is persistence. The Mighigan ruling would not have been made if one man had accepted the first (or even the fifth) "no." In the Ohio district, the school will respond only if the parent continues pressure after the first refusal. The moral, it seems, as in many dealings with schools: accept a "yes" graciously, and keep plugging if you get a "no."

In all fairness to school personnel, they are often in a difficult position. As indicated by comments of a number of participants in the study, some custodial parents want to do all in their power to keep the other parent cut off from information about the children. A few comments about a desire to "protect child from visits by the absent parent," and to be "notified in case the other parent comes to school" surfaced. This kind of comment was infrequent, but schools facing even a few parents who are resistant to informing the non-custodial parent about the school have some hard decisions to make. Child snatching is another unfortunate occurrence with which some schools have had to contend.

An additional consideration for schools is the time and administrative detail that will be involved if non-custody parents begin asserting their rights. Some schools, as noted above, are going further than merely adapting to parent demands. They are initiating contact and offering information. We congratulate these schools and encourage more to follow suit.

In the meantime, we also encourage single parents who do not have custody to approach the schools. At the very least, access to your child's school records should be available to you. If you find the schools balking at this, you'll find ready help from William Riley, Director, Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) Office, U.S. Department of Education, 4512 Switzer Building, Washington, DC 20202. Beyond that, you can

certainly request information about school activities, receiving copies of the report card and school pictures and attendance at parent-teacher conferences. Know, however, that in most locations these are not covered by school, local, or state policies or regulations. This puts the decisions in the hands of the local school personnel. Anything you can do to help, like giving stamped, self-addressed envelopes to the teachers for sending copies of report cards and paying for copying costs in advance, will certainly increase your chances for cooperation. Some schools will be immediately responsive. Hopefully, parents will persist even if they receive a "no." In the Michigan case mentioned above, it took the parent 18 months, but he finally prevailed.

SUGGESTIONS FOR PARENTS

- *Find out about the school's policy on access to records, making sure it allows access for non-custody parents.*
- *Provide stamped, self-addressed envelopes when requesting the school to send copies of report cards to you.*
- *Offer to pay for copying costs of report cards, school activities notices, etc.*

SUGGESTIONS FOR SCHOOLS

- *Develop new forms that have spaces for names and addresses of both parents (as well as stepparent).*
- *Send copies of report cards and school activities notices to the non-custody parent.*

- *Check your district policy on access of non-custody parents to their children's records, making sure it conforms to FERPA regulations. If there is no such policy, work toward one. Contact William Riley for information (address above).*

Curriculum Materials

Another area with which single parents feel at odds is curriculum materials. As one parent put it, "only the textbook, two-parent environment is shown as 'normal.'" Seeing primarily two-parent family situations in school materials can contribute to a child's sense of being "out of it," if her or his family does not fit that mold. In our study, 57% of the parents said varied family styles were not included in children's textbooks. But a substantial percentage of the parents said they did not *know* whether or not the texts (31%), library books (43%), or other school materials (40%) showed a variety of family styles This lack of awareness on the part of parents is unfortunate, since that is a first step toward making needed changes. Publishers are not likely to make changes on their own.

As indicated by the responses to our survey, single parents *do* want a variety of family styles included in the textbooks, library books, and other school materials their children use. In each case, over 90% responded that varied family structures *should* be used. But if parents and school personnel want various family configurations shown, they will have to let publishers know.

There are instances of publishers who are beginning to be aware of diverse family structures. One company, in its first-grade social studies book on families, shows photographs of various family styles with very little written text, thus allowing children to talk about the similarities and differences between the pictures and their own situations. This approach can be helpful to children who need an accepting atomsphere in which to talk about their own families.

Another area dealt with in the questionnaire was school library books that specifically help children deal with death and divorce. Twenty-six percent of the parents in the study indicated their school library contained such books, but another 54% indicated a lack of awareness about them.

SUGGESTIONS FOR PARENTS

- *If this area concerns you (as it did over 90% of those in our study), let school personnel, including teachers, principal, and district curriculum specialists, know that you want your child to see various family structures in the materials used at school.*
- *Let the publishers of your children's texts know it is important to you that they include a variety of family styles.*

SUGGESTIONS FOR SCHOOLS

- *Institute textbooks review committees (if you do not already have them), making sure single parents are represented.*
- *When considering textbook adoption, review the books for representation of varied family structures.*

- *Contact publishing representatives used by your district, let them know your concerns about the inclusion of a variety of family styles.*

- *Look for books and materials in libraries (or make your own from magazine pictures) that show various family situations to supplement the assigned textbooks.*

- *Ask the school librarian to order books that show varied family styles and that help children deal with death and divorce (a special section might be set up so these materials are easily accessible).*

Groups for Children

Children whose parents have divorced often have mixed feelings of guilt (what did I do to cause this?) and hope (maybe if I'm good enough they will get back together). These feelings, if not surfaced, can interfere with the child's schoolwork and his or her ability to concentrate. To remedy this and to deal with other issues surrounding death or divorce, some schools, again a small number, are offering classes or group sessions for children about death, separation, or divorce. Eight percent of the participants said these sessions were available to their children in schools, though 87.5% of the parents wished their children had access to such sessions in the schools.

The Port Washington Union Free School District on Long Island, New York, offers such groups.I They have developed a filmstrip which introduces the sessions. Parents and children

together decide on the child's participation. The children enjoy and look forward to the sessions. They are able to talk about their experiences and to see that others have feelings similar to theirs. With help, they are able to see that their parents' separations are not their fault and that wishing or being good will not help their parents to be together again.

SUGGESTIONS

- *Resources available for establishing groups for children are listed in the Resource section at the end of this report.*

Before and After School Care for Children

The book, *Changing American Family,*[4] cites the lack of availability of day care for school-age children as a major concern for single parents. We might add that it is a concern for married parents who both work, as well. In response to this need for care outside school hours, a small, but growing, number of schools are providing extended day programs. In our study, only 8% of the single parents had access to before and after school care that was provided by their school.

Various approaches are being taken by those schools offering extended-day programs. One town in Pennsylvania uses the school's buses to transport students to a local community college for recreation in the gymnasium until parents pick them up.

---

4. Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 1979.

In Howard County, Maryland, the Columbia Association (CA) is an organization that provides Howard County residents with recreational facilities, transportation, nursery schools, and maintains the open-space system in the community. In addition, for a fee, CA supervises before and after school care, using school facilities in county elementary schools.

Arlington, Virginia, schools provide before and after school care (7 am to 6 pm) with an after-kindergarten program as well. Parents provide transportation and fees are based on parent ability to pay. On vacation days and teacher in-service days, the community recreation department and the local "Y" have programs for children.

A program called Latchkey in Minneapolis, Minnesota, is run by the Department of Community Educational Services and provides after school care. Although facilities, payroll, accounting, and legal services are provided by the Minneapolis Public Schools, each local site of Latchkey is run as a small business. Parent advisory councils do the hiring, firing, and curriculum planning for their own site -- a mini-version of school based management, says Linda Hutchinson, coordinator of the program. The goals of the program, as stated in *Latchkey*, are:

- To provide low-cost, quality day care to the children of working parents;
- To provide a program that coordinates with and complements a child's school experience;

- To be responsive to the expressed needs and stated values of parents;
- To maximize the use of public resources by more fully utilizing school space and personnel;
- To make big city schools more attractive by offering a service that fills an unmet community need;
- To strengthen the community and to foster community development by providing a day-care option for parents.[5]

One parent in NCCE's study told of an after school program that provides soccer, football, and crafts along with a study hall until 5 pm two days a week. Even two days is a relief to parents needing to arrange care for children. On their own and in cooperation with other community agencies, some schools are changing the hours children are supervised to be more in keeping with the needs of today's families.

When asked whether or not schools *should* provide before and after school care, 64% of the parents in our study responded positively. While this is well over half the participants, this percentage is one of the lowest for what single parents think the school should be providing. Perhaps this low figure is because the extended day program falls outside the mandate of the school. In spite of its indirect relation to learning, in many communities, schoola are facing more and more demand

---

5. Cramer, Felker, & Lucas, Minnesota Community Education Association, 1977.

for increased use of the facilities to maximize the cost-effectiveness of operating schools. On a purely practical level, offering before and after school care on an at-cost basis to parents is one way of meeting the needs of the community and improving relations with them while at the same time using existing facilities more fully.

SUGGESTIONS FOR PARENTS

- *If a school sponsored extended day program would be beneficial to you and your children, ask for it and be willing to help set it up.*

SUGGESTIONS FOR SCHOOLS

- *Do a needs assessment in your school of how many parents are currently making child care arrangements before and after school and would like to have this available at school.*
- *Explore the possibilities of coordinating with another community agency in making this service available to parents.*
- *Think of the benefits of extended day programs for parents, children, and for you. Do not automatically write them off because of their indirect relation to learning.*
- *Consider opportunities to use older children to tutor younger ones in after school programs.*

Late Buses

In working with groups of single parents during the development of our questionnaire, one mother mentioned that

her son had to drop out of extra-curricular activities when her husband died. The dilemma: they lived too far from school for the child to walk home; she had to go to work and could no longer pick the child up after the activity; there was no late bus. To this item on the questionnaire, only 18% of the parents responded that there are late afternoon buses making after school activities available to their children (86% thought the schools should have late buses).

With increased energy costs, providing double bus runs is admittedly expensive, but to inadvertently exclude from school activities children who cannot afford a car of their own (or who are not old enough to drive) or whose parent(s) work and cannot provide shuttle service seems discriminatory.

SUGGESTIONS FOR PARENTS

- *See about arranging for transportation with other parents who are available to drive.*

SUGGESTIONS FOR SCHOOLS

- *Provide transportation for after school activities. Students in two-parent homes, whose parents both work, and handicapped students also need this transportation.*

In-Service Tranining for School Personnel

Our survey did not have an item on in-service training. However, during the course of our study, we became aware of

school systems that are providing workshops to school personnel on single-parent family/school issues. Baltimore County schools provided a week-long summer session taught by one of their school counselors. The session was attended by 60 classroom and special teachers, school nurses, and school counselors.

One district in California has developed videotape for in-service training and a manual to help teachers identify their own attitudes toward single-parent families. The manual also has suggestions for activities with children. Other systems have provided day or afternoon workshops for teachers and/or administrators as a part of their ongoing, in-service activities.

In addition, some universities are now offering courses or workshops for teachers and school administrators that focus on single-parent families. These courses and workshops help school personnel become aware of the school-related needs of single-parent families. The courses also provide information about programs and policies operating in some schools and help school personnel become aware of their own attitudes and assumptions about single parents and children from single-parent homes.

SUGGESTIONS

- *In-service materials and available workshops are listed in the Resources section at the end of this paper.*

C. WHAT ASSUMPTIONS *ARE* SINGLE PARENTS ENCOUNTERING?

As indicated by an item beginning, "Does the school assume that *both* parents are in the home . . . ," parents are evidently encountering such assumptions. Nearly two-thirds (65%) said their children had been asked to make presents for father/mother at school. Forty percent said their children had been asked to interview their father/mother for a class assignment. Some of the parents (one-third) said their child had been pressured to get *both* parents to attend a parent meeting.

Forty-two percent indicated that the school had planned social events for only mother or father to attend with the child (Breakfast with Dad, Mother and Daughter Dinner, etc.) A Florida elementary school, for example, has recently begun a "donuts for dad" program, in which parents can come to the school library and meet with teachers on specified days from 6:30-8:00 a.m. Although mothers as well as fathers are allowed to participate, the name of the program does not make that obvious and children who do not have an available "dad" may feel left out.

One dilemma for schools in this regard is the cultural tradition that relationship with the school is mother's job. In an honest attempt to involve more fathers, programs that focused on dad's attendance have sprung up. While we at NCCE are supportive of programs that encourage increased contact between school personnel and the community, we are also concerned

that all families be explicitly included. When these programs automatically exclude a growing number of students, by virtue of the fact that their fathers (or mothers) are not accessible, it is time to rethink the focus.

If participation of all parents is specifically invited and encouraged, the activities have the possibility of a larger attendance without excluding any family. If meetings, programs, and special activities are scheduled outside of normal working hours, they then become available to nearly all parents: mothers *and* fathers, those who work outside *and* those who work inside the home. A simple means for including all families is to avoid specifying *which* parent can participate in an event. Instead of naming a program "donuts for dads," choose a name like "pastries for parents," or "morning conversations." Rather than "Breakfast with Mom," call it "Bring a Parent to Breakfast." A little awareness and forethought can easily remedy this concern of single parents.

Another assumption questioned in the survey was whether or not parents feel the school assumes that any problem their child has (emotional, behavioral, achievement) is related to being from a single-parent family. To this question, 45% of the participants responded positively. An important reinforcement to this finding is the fact that 62% do not think school personnel consider the one-parent home to be a normal family style.

Ten percent said the school had questioned their children about the care they receive from their parent. This included questions about hygiene (How often does your parent make you take a bath?), before and after school care (Who is at home when you get home? When does your father/mother get home from work? How long are you alone? etc.), and nutrition (What kinds of meals does your mother/father fix for you?)

SUGGESTIONS FOR PARENTS

- *Let teachers know your marital status.*
- *Talk to school personnel about how you feel about activities designated for just a mother or just a father.*
- *Talk to teachers about alternative activities to making designated father/mother presents (or cards). Some that may fit for you and your child may be: making a present for another relative or friend, doing an unrelated activity, letting the child make two presents (for example, if there is a parent and stepparent), making a present for the parent that the child lives with, making presents for hospitalized children or for nursing home residents, and you can probably think of others.*
- *In your situation, the other parent may have contact with the child and it may be entirely appropriate for the child to make a present for him or her. Let the teacher know this, too. Do not assume that teachers know what is appropriate in your case.*

SUGGESTIONS FOR SCHOOLS

- *Plan events for <u>all</u> parents.*
- *Check with children and parents about their preferences when you want to plan a present-making activity.*

- *Consider an alternative activity for all the children, such as having children discuss what Mothers Day or Fathers Day means to them, making presents for hospitalized children or nursing home residents, or not focusing on Mothers Day/Fathers Day at all.*

- *With the help of the parents, look for causes behind changes in behavior and achievment. Do not assume that all problems are related to single-parent family status. If the problems are indeed related, do not assume they are inevitable and cannot be helped.*

D. HOW DO SINGLE PARENTS VIEW THE ATTITUDES OF SCHOOL PERSONNEL?

Questions about school personnel attitudes obviously tapped single parents' perceptions of these attitudes. An attitude survey was not done directly with school personnel. Therefore, while these results do not reflect the *actual* attitudes held by school personnel, they do show how the parents perceived school personnel attitudes.

While 39% of the participating parents had experienced generally positive attitudes from school personnel, 30% had experienced negative attitudes, and 31% had no opinion on this item. Thirty-five percent had heard specific negative comments about single parents or children in single-parent homes from school personnel; 48% had heard school personnel mention "broken homes" or other stereotyped language when speaking of single-parent families.

Parents' comments on these items indicated that parents felt the schools expect children from single-parent homes to

have problems. Expressions of *patronizing* sympathy ("poor little thing") were noted as negative comments (23.5% of the parents thought that school personnel have a protective attitude toward children who have experienced divorce or death of a parent).

Some of the parents had heard school personnel express surprise that their children had adjusted so well. Some had heard blanket statements about children from single-parent families not being well cared for; others had heard comments such as, "Oh, well, you can't expect him (her) to do any better, after all . . . ."

A number had heard comments that mothers should stay at home, not be so busy, not have a boyfriend. Many female single parents had heard comments that the child needed the influence of a male. Some parents had heard comments relating to lack of money, poor clothes, etc.

On the positive side, 10% of the participants had heard specific positive comments from school personnel. These comments, which parents described as supportive and admiring, included expressions of pleasure at parent participation, the positive addition of a different life experience, and the strong family orientation they had seen in the one-parent homes. Some parents commented that they see the schools as interested in helping all concerned. "They are interested in both the child and the parent; they listen."

Language is important in our culture. In recent years, much attention has been given to the subtleties of the exclusion of women in statements using exclusively male terms (he, his, mankind, brotherhood, etc.) Another, less recognized subtlety that has crept into our language is the term "broken home." "Broken" implies the need to be fixed, something that's not quite whole, a mindset toward a family in which there has been a separation or divorce.

When we allow ourselves to use a term such as "broken home," we are perpetuating the myth that a single-parent home cannot be whole, complete. Although it is a term we've become used to, it is a term that is subtly derogatory, since it produces negative images of behavior that in turn create expectations which are communicated to children in one way or another; and the cycle continues.

It is uncomfortable to remind people that we are sensitive to their language, whether the point is male/female exclusiveness or stereotypes of single-parent families. But if we want people to be aware that their language affects us in a certain way, then we must let them know our reactions when they use the words "broken home." We must also learn to let them know in a way that is easy for them to hear and that will not be offensive to them, admittedly a tricky assignment. Principals can help their teachers be aware of the implications through memos and comments at faculty meetings. In-service training can explore

the thoughts behind the words. And it will also take responding to others use of negative, hurtful language to help them become aware and change their language.

"Watch Your Language," a chapter in Isolina Ricci's book *Mom's House, Dad's House: Making Shared Custody Work,*[6] gives guidelines to the single parent for avoiding the subtly (and not so subtly) derogatory words and phrases. This chapter (as well as the whole book) is useful to single parents and school personnel alike.

SUGGESTIONS FOR PARENTS

- *When you hear negative comments, think twice before you let them pass. It is possible to let the person who made the comment know how it affects you without being obnoxious.*
- *Help to organize a parent-teacher meeting focusing on single-parent families, being sure that positive experiences are given equal time.*

SUGGESTIONS FOR SCHOOLS

- *Work to eliminate negative language such as "broken home," "fractured family," "diminished family," through memos, faculty meetings, and in-service workshops.*
- *Through in-service workshops, help teachers to become aware of any negative expectations they may have for children from single-parent families, or stereotypes of those families. Awareness is a first step toward changing our thinking.*

---

6. New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1980.

- *Remind yourself and others to "look further" for reasons for changes in behavior and achievement.*
- *Approach each child as an individual rather than as part of a category.*

E. SHOULD THE SCHOOLS KNOW A PARENT'S MARITAL STATUS?

More information about single parents' perceptions of the attitudes of school personnel came from an item about marital status. Eighty-two percent of the parents said the school did know their marital status. Fourteen percent did not know whether or not school personnel knew, and 4% said school personnel were not aware of their marital status. When asked whether or not schools *should* know their marital status, 80% said yes; 7.5% indicated they had no opinion; and 12.5% said no.

We also asked *why* parents felt the way they did. Comments volunteered by parents were revealing. Basically, parents who did not want the school to know their marital status did not want their child singled out. Some parents said they did not want the school to know because "it is too easy for them to build negative stereotypes about my child." Even some of the parents who wanted the school personnel to know feared that the child might be "automatically stereotyped." Other parents said they didn't want the school to know because "being the child of a single parent is considered very negatively," and these children are "immediately labeled."

Some single parents thought their marital status was none of the school's business. Others didn't want the knowledge to make a difference in their child's treatment. Still other parents feared that they themselves would be discriminated against or the school would judge their liefestyles. Some thought the school personnel tend to blame everything that happens to the child on the single-parent status.

But the "no's" were in the minority. Most parents (80%) wanted the school to know. When asked why, many commented that, when school personnel know, they are better able to relate to the child as an individual and to be responsive to the child's particular needs. Others indicated that this information would help the school know the child better.

One parent thought that school personnel should know only if they would be accepting of the situation. In the school his child attends, the personnel were accepting, so he wanted them to know. Another parent said, "If they can understand without blaming, they can be helpful."

Many of the non-custody parents wanted the school to know so they could receive progress reports on their children and other information from the school. Conversely, a few of the parents with custody said it was necessary for the school to know because of court orders expressly prohibiting the other parent from having any contact with the child.

Some of the parents thought letting the school know their marital status would help raise the awareness of school personnel. One parent said it would help them "to realize that only about 10% of all families live the lifestyle of father employed, mother at home, and to plan with this in mind."

Many of the positive responses to the question of whether or not the schools should know parental marital status referred to informing school personnel so that they would not ask the children or provide activities that would be embarrassing. An example of this would be "and, Karen, what does your mommy do?" when Karen's mommy has not been in Karen's home for the past year.

Over and over again, parents referred to incidents in which Mothers Day or Fathers Day gifts were made in school and sent home. Some were hopeful that, if the school knew the family situation, teachers would not ask the children to make presents for the absent parent. Others were beginning to despair that even this knowledge would ever make a difference. One mother said her child's father had been dead for three years but the child was still bring home Fathers Day gifts.

A mother who assisted in our questionnaire development told of receiving a call from her child's teacher at the end of the first grading period. The teacher, in reviewing the school records, had come across the fact that the child's father was deceased. "My heart just ached when I realized how often

I had said things like 'ask your father.' Now that I know, I'll be much more careful of how I phrase things." This incident is encouraging in that it shows a teacher who is sensitive to the child's situation. The teacher's response also highlights the reality that a parent cannot rely solely on school records to communicate to school personnel the status of the family. Although many teachers do review school records for their students, many do not. If a parent wants school personnel to know the family situation, he/she needs to take personal responsibility for communicating with each individual involved. As teachers change, new communication is necessary.

Another reason given by many single parents who wanted the school to know their marital status was a hope that the school would show more understanding of single parents and single-parent homes. They hoped it would help school personnel avoid stereotyping and making assumptions about every home being a two-parent home.

We agree with those parents who think the school should know the family situation. That knowledge can be the beginning of dialogue that makes possible the partnership between home and school that we feel is so important.

SUGGESTIONS FOR PARENTS

- *Make a personal contact with the child's teacher(s) to let them know about your marital status (do not assume they have picked it up from the records).*

- *Keep school records up to date.*

- *If you have a special concern about how the school will handle the knowledge, voice that concern and let the appropriate person(s) (teacher or principal, most likely) know what you want.*

- *If you have expectations about what school personnel will or will not do as a result of knowing you are a single parent (for example, that the teacher will not assign homework to interview the absent parent), let the appropriate person(s) know. Do not assume they will automatically know.*

SUGGESTIONS FOR SCHOOLS

- *An attitude that is neither patronizing nor judgmental will encourage parents to be open about their family status.*

- *Revise school forms to include names and addresses of both parents (and stepparents or extended family members as well).*

- *Read the school records of your children early in the year to learn the family situation.*

- *Initiate a conversation with single parents about how you anticipate dealing with the family situation with their child in the classroom. Ask for their preferences and suggestions.*

F. HOW DID PARTICIPANTS FEEL ABOUT THE SCHOOLS?

Thirty-nine percent said the school was a very high priority in their everyday life. Fifty-four percent said school was a high priority but that other things took most of their time and effort. Only 8% said they were too busy trying to survive to give any time or energy to schools. These data point to

the fact that the participants are not a group of disenchanted complainers. They are interested in the schools and care that their children have a positive experience with the schools.

A question on whether the parents felt they have the kind of influence in their child's education experience that they would like to have provided a near even split A little over half (52%) said they did not, while the remaining 48% said that they did.

Sixty-one percent of the participants were satisfied with the school's response to them as single parents. Thirty-nine percent were not. Eight percent of the parents who indicated a frustration with the schools said that their frustration was related to being a single parent. Forty-two of those responding to this item felt their frustration was only partially related to being a single parent. Fifty percent who responded indicated their frustration with the public schools would exist regardless of their marital status. Obviously, for the majority of those who were less than satisfied with the schools their children were in, the dissatisfaction went beyond single parent issues. This indicates a need for a better partnership between schools and parents on *all* issues, not just areas of concern that are related to being in single-parent families.

SUGGESTIONS FOR PARENTS

- *Let schools know your concerns and work with school personnel to resolve them.*
- *Make positive suggestions, not just negative complaints.*
- *Meet with other single parents around your common concerns. Decide on your top priorities (taking into account both how crucial and issue and how realistic it will be to bring about the desired change). Present these to school personnel along with suggestions for dealing with the concern. Parents Organizing to Improve Schools*[7] *gives more suggestions on specific steps to take.*
- *Meet with other parents (single and married) around concerns that are not related (limited) to single-parent families, using the approach suggested above. A group of parents has a better chance of being heard than one individual.*

SUGGESTIONS FOR SCHOOLS

- *Take the first step by inviting parents to raise their concerns in an open meeting. This shows a willingness to take parents seriously.*
- *If there is not already one operating, initiate a parent advisory committee to have input into school decisions.*
- *Initiate a school decision-making team that consists of teachers, parents, students, and the principal(s) and include representation from single parents.*

G. HOW DO SINGLE PARENTS FEEL ABOUT THEIR CHILDREN'S SCHOOL BEHAVIOR AND ACHIEVEMENT?

Three-quarters of the participants in our study were not troubled by their children's school behavior (one-quarter were

---

7. National Committee for Citizens in Education, Columbia, MD: 1974.

troubled) and two-thirds were not bothered by their children's school achievement (one-third were).

This points to a high degree of satisfaction with their children's school behavior and achievement on the part of the single parents involved in our study.

We asked single parents how they felt about their children's achievement and behavior at school for a reason. We wanted to see if there is a pervasive worry among single parents about their children's school behavior and achievement.

The stereotype of children from single-parent families is often that they are problem children. We wanted to get a reading on whether or not single parents on the whole see their children as having problems in school. Evidently they do not.

On the contrary, many parents made comments in letters attached to their questionnaires about their pride in their children, and their pride in themselves for providing a whole and wholesome atmosphere for their children's growth. They told of children's school achievements in both academic and activity areas. Many decried the stereotypes about poor behavior and achievement as setting up negative expectations. They wanted their children to be looked at as individuals. A fear was expressed by some that, if teachers expected negative behavior and low achievement, a self-fulfilling prophecy would be set up that would bring about the negative behavior and the low achievement the teachers expected in the first place.

By contrast to these statements, the reports of a study by the National Association of Elementary School Principals and I/D/E/A[8] suggest that, when compared with children from two-parent homes, children in single-parent families have lower achievement and have a higher incidence of problem behavior. When the results of this study are held up to the comments made by single parents about their children and to the data on how they feel about their children's school behavior and achievement, an interesting, though not novel, conclusion is suggested: when dealing with an individual child, we must focus on *that child* instead of on the statistics about the category the child fits into (whether it be race, family structure, living conditions, handicap, etc.)

Statistics give us some idea of "likelihood" and in that they are helpful; but they tell us nothing about the individual child. To find out about that child we must look at her or him and take into account her or his individual strengths and weaknesses, and individual responses to the situation.

SUGGESTIONS FOR PARENTS AND SCHOOLS

- *Work to eliminate negative stereotypes that do exist (both your own and those of others).*
- *View each child as an individual with strengths and weaknesses both similar to and different from those of others.*

---

8. "The Most Significant Minority: One Parent Children in the Schools," (1980), National Association of Elementary School Principals, 1801 N. Moore Street, Arlington, VA 22209.

CONCLUSION

National Committee for Citizens In Education

Single parents and the public schools: how *DOES* the partnership work? In this report, we have taken a look at that partnership and found that for some parents and some schools it is working well, and for other parents and other schools it is not working so well. With this report, we hope to encourage that partnership from both sides.

For the schools, we have pointed out issues and areas of need for single parent families. We have also pointed to programs and policies that can be (and have been) implemented to be responsive to those needs. We hope that the variety of suggestions will be used as a "shopping list."

For the parents, we have pointed out other parents' experiences with the schools and what some schools are doing. We hope that single parents will see that they don't have to sit back and wait for the schools to implement programs; that they can express their needs and work with the schools to help get the programs under way and the policies amended; that they can initiate the partnership.

When parents and school personnel work together, good things happen for children. *And* good things happen for parents and for the schools.

National Committee for Citizens In Education

BOOKS ADDRESSING RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN SINGLE PARENTS AND THE SCHOOLS

Mom's House, Dad's House: Making Shared Custody Work, by Isolina Ricci. New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1980.

Includes an appendix on "Information for Schools."

Single Parents are People Too, by Carol Murdock. New York: Butterick, 1980.

A brief section deals with conferences during working hours, teacher insensitivity and prejudgment, and offers suggestions for working more closely with the schools.

When You Are a Single Parent, by Robert C. DiGiulio. St. Meinrad, Indiana: Abbey Press, 1979.

You CAN I prove Your Child's School, by William Rioux. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1980.

BOOKS (AND A PERIODICAL) THAT HELP BUILD A HOME/SCHOOL PARTNERSHIP

Citizen Action in Education, a periodical published by the Institute for Responsive Education. Boston, MA.

Developing Leadership for Parent/Citizen Groups, published by the National Committee for Citizens in Education. Columbia, MD: 1976.

Parents Organizing to Improve Schools, published by the National Committee for Citizens in Education. Columbia, MD: 1976.

Los Padres se Organizan Para Mejorar Las Escuelas, same as above, in Spanish.

Partners: Parents and Schools, published by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. Alexandria, VA: 1979.

You CAN Improve Your Child's School, by William Rioux. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1980.

ARTICLES

"Dispelling the Stereotypes of the 'Broken Home,'" by Isolina Ricci. Conciliation Courts Review, Vol. 12, #2, Jan 1976, pp. 7-14.

"Divorce, Remarriage and the Schools," by Isolina Ricci. Kappan, Mar 1979, pp. 509-511.

"The Schools and Single Parents: Accessibility is the Key," by Phyllis L. Clay, Bulletin, Vol. 64, #432, Jan 1980, pp. 40-43.

PERIODICALS

Principal, National Association of Elementary School Principals, 1801 North Moore Street, Arlington, VA 22209. Vol. 59, #1, Oct 1979 ($4 single copy).

Single Dad's Life Style, Box 4842, Scottsdale, AZ 85258 ($1/single copy; $12/year).

In addition to the monthly journal, Bob Hirschfeld publishes an annual list in the February issue of fathers' rights groups, by state.

The Single Parent, Parents Without Partners, 7910 Woodmont Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20014 ($2.75/year for members; $5.50/year for non-members).

SINGLE PARENT ORGANIZATIONS

Parents Without Partners, Int'l., 7190 Woodmont Avenue, Washington, DC 20014.

Local chapters in the United States and Canada provide programs of education, family and adult social activities; reading lists available for parents and children.

A list of single fathers' groups is available from Bob Hirschfeld, Single Dad's Life Style, Box 4842, Scottsdale, AZ 85258 ($1).

BOOKS FOR PARENTS ON DEATH AND DIVORCE

Children of Divorce, by J. Louis Despert. Garden City: Doubleday.

Concerning Death: A Practical Guide for the Living, by Earl A. Grollman. Boston: Beacon Press, 1974.

Explaining Death to Children, by Earl A. Grollman. Boston: Beacon Press, 1972.

Explaining Divorce to Children, by Earl A. Grollman. Boston: Beacon Press, 1972.

On Death and Dying, by E. Kubler Ross. New York: MacMillan, 1969.

Questions and Answers on Death and Dying, by E. Kubler Ross. New York: MacMillan, 1974.

BOOKS FOR CHILDREN -- TWO HOMES

I Have Two Families, by Doris Wild Helmering. Nashville: Abingdon, 1981 (ages 6-8).

A child's anticipation of divorce and a picture of her life in her two homes (one with her dad and one with her mom).

Two Homes to Live In: A Child's Eye View of Divorce, by Barbara Shook Hazan. Human Sciences Press, 72 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10011. 1978.

BOOKS FOR CHILDREN -- DEATH

Talking About Death: A Dialogue Between Parent and Child with Parent's Guide and Recommended Resources, by Earl A. Grollman. Boston: Beacon Press, 1976.

When My Mommy Died, by Janice M. Hammond. Ann Arbor: Cranbrook Publishing Company, 1980.

When People Die, by Joanne E. Bernstein, Stephen V. Gullo. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1977.

BOOKS FOR CHILDREN -- DIVORCE

How to Get it Together When Your Parents are Coming Apart, by Arlene Richards and Irene Willis. New York: Bantam Books, 1976.

Talking About Divorce and Separation: A Dialogue Between Parent and Child, by Earl A. Grollman. Boston: Beacon Press, 1975.

FILMS, FILMSTRIPS, AND VIDEOTAPES

Are You Listening? Martha Stuart Communications, Inc., P.O. Box 127, Hillsdale, New York 12529.

Videotape; single parents discuss aspects of parenting, useful for in-service training or parent groups.

Children and Death, Wolfelt Productions, 814 W. Charles Street, Muncie, Indiana 47305.

Filmstrip; helps children deal with death, primarily for adults.

Children of Divorce -- Transitional Issues for Elementary School;
Children of Divorce -- Transitional Issues for Junior High and High School Ages;
Divorce -- Part 1;
Divorce -- Part 2.

American Personnel and Guidance Association, Order Services Department, 2 Skyline Place, Suite 400, 5203 Leesburg Pike, Falls Church, VA 22041 (703-820-4700).

Set of films; vignettes, useful for discussion in parent groups (all four), children's groups (Children of Divorce), and in-service training (all four).

Chris and Bernie, New Day Films, P. O. Box 315, Franklin Lakes, New Jersey 07417.

Twenty-five minute color film focusing on special needs and problems of single parents.

The Sky is Falling, Dr. Margaret Galante, 16 Belleview Ave., Port Washington Union Free School District, New York.

Filmstrip; informs children and parents of the counseling groups available to children of divorce in the Port Washington schools.

RESOURCES AVAILABLE ON GROUPS FOR CHILDREN

"Children's Divorce Groups," article by Gary S. Wilkinson and Robert T. Bleck, in Elementary School Guidance and Counseling, Feb 1977, pp. 205-213.

Divorce Groups Counseling for Secondary School Students; Group Counseling for Children of Divorce (Elementary), Manuals by Janice M. Hammond, Wayne County Intermediate School District, 33500 Van Born Road, Wayne, MI 48128.

Divorce . . . Kids Need to Cope, Too! (Information Sheet). Winnebago County, Dept. of Social Services, Gail Benton, 448 Algoma Blvd., Box 2646, Oshkosh, WI 54903.

Divorced Kids Group (Information Sheet), E. Guidance Center, Lexington High School, 251 Waltham Street, Lexington, MA 02173.

Groups on the Changing Family (Information Sheet). John T. Sheridan, School Counselor, Park Forest Jr. High School, 2180 School Drive, State College, PA 16801.

"A Matter of Loss: Living on, Surviving Sadness," article by Leslie Schenkman Kaplan, The School Counselor. Vol. 26, #4, March 1979, pp. 229-235.

Single Parented Groups (Information Sheet). Winfield Elementary School, Sorelle B. Feldberg, 8300 Carlson Lane, Baltimore, MD 21207.

The Sky is Falling, (filmstrip listed above).

CURRICULUM MATERIALS

Exploring Childhood, EDC School and Society Programs, 55 Chapel Street, Newton, MA 02160.

"Raising a Family Alone," a booklet looking at single parenting; "We Are a Family," poster showing varied family styles.

Our Families, Scholastic Magazines, Inc., 50 West 44th Street, New York, NY 10036.

Grade 1 social studies text with variety of family styles pictured. Minimal printed text.

BEFORE AND AFTER SCHOOL CARE

The Columbia Association, Columbia, MD 21044.

Confronting the Child Care Crisis, by Stevanne Auerbach. Boston: Beacon Press, 1979.

Day Care and the Public Schools: Profiles of Five Communities, by James A. Levine. Available from the EDC Distribution Center, 39 Chapel Street, Newton, MA 02160.

Latchkey, Fred Stickney, 2101 Telegraph Avenue, Oakland, CA 94609.

Latch Key Program, Barb Otto, Latch Key Citywide Coordinator, Lehmann Center, 1006 W. Lake Street, Minneapolis, MN 55408.

School Age Child Care: Programs and Issues. Papers from a June 1979 Conference at Wheelock College. Available from ERIC/ECE, College of Education, University of Illinois, Urbana, IL 61801 (Catalogue #189).

School-Age Child Care Project, Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, Wellesley, MA 02181.

Youth Service Bureau of the Human Resources Department, Arlene Sarver, Maricopa County Community Services, 3455 West Durango, Phoenix, AZ 85009, 602-262-3214.

Provides planning assistance to school districts to provide after-school child care for children of working and single parents.

IN-SERVICE TRAINING

Children Facing Divorce. Dr. Barbara Ann Bebensee, 5588 Skyline Drive, Evergreen, CO 80439.

Workshop for educators on how to handle divorce in the classroom.

Children of Divorce. Bank Street College of Education, 610 West 112th Street, New York, NY 10025.

Weekend workshops (for credit).

Children of Divorce. Francene Colvin and Roni Simon, Mill Valley School District, Marin County Schools Office, Mill Valley, CA.

A series of videotapes and a teachers' manual of activities for the classroom.

Course for Teachers. Nancy McGrath, 3023 Guilford Avenue, Baltimore, MD. 21218.

Week long in-service workshop for Baltimore County teachers, counselors, and school nurses.

Working with Single-Parent Families. National Committee for Citizens in Education, Suite 410 Wilde Lake Village Green, Columbia, MD 21044.

Workshops for teachers and administrators.

ADDITIONAL COPIES OF THIS REPORT MAY BE OBTAINED FOR THE PRICE OF $3.25 plus $1 for postage and handling from:

National Committee for Citizens in Education
410 Wilde Lake Village Green
Columbia, Maryland 21044